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The Struggle For Mastery in Britain: Lloyd George Versus Asquith, December 1916

J. M. McEwen

Myth and mystery continue to cloud the supersession of Herbert Henry Asquith by David Lloyd George half-way through the First World War. Then, and long afterwards, there was much talk of intrigue and conspiracy, often inspired by those who believed Asquith had been jockeyed out of the premiership by an unholy alliance of low schemers who scrupled at nothing. It is tempting to dismiss such charges as baseless, as the loser's perennial excuse. Yet in the records that have come to light there are enough gaps, irregularities, and teasing hints of suppressed evidence to keep alive old suspicions that some things occurred which many of the participants wished forgotten. Walter (later Viscount) Long, for instance, once wrote to Lord Beaverbrook in response to a request for his version of events: "I have omitted a great deal that happened at the time, as I believe I promised not to mention certain very interesting incidents."[1] Before he died Long seems to have weeded out of his private papers material relating to Asquith's overthrow.[2] And in a massive three-volume biography of Lord Curzon there are only two slight references to the change of government in 1916, a remarkable feat of omission considering Curzon's role.[3] The biographer, Lord Ronaldshay, later professed innocent astonishment at finding nothing pertinent to this great event in Curzon's voluminous papers. Another minister who was near the center, Herbert (later Viscount) Samuel, appears to have reshaped his chronicle of events in a manner more flattering to himself but less useful to historians.[4] Equally suggestive is a remark

1. House of Lords Record Office (hereafter, HLRO), Long to Beaverbrook, 15 Nov. 1919, Beaverbrook Papers, Box 3, Folder 1. (Long was President of the Local Government Board.)

2. Austen Chamberlain wrote to Lord Robert Cecil on 10 July 1931: "None of us appear to have anything but the scantiest records. Zetland [Ronaldshay] found nothing in Curzon's papers. Eric Long tells me that he has volumes of his father's letters, but nothing connected with the crisis of 1916. At that point there is a gap and he says it is evident that at some later date his father destroyed all letters relating to it." University of Birmingham, Austen Chamberlain Papers, AC 15/3/39. (Chamberlain was Secretary for India, Cecil was Minister of Blockade.)

3. Earl of Ronaldshay, *The Life of Lord Curzon* (London, 1928), III, 147. (Curzon was Lord Privy Seal.)

4. From internal evidence it seems clear that Samuel's diary entries for 4 and 5 Dec. 1916 were written after those of 6, 7, and 8 Dec. This hides the fact that early in the crisis Samuel was keen to continue in office under Lloyd George but could not sever himself from Asquith and the other Liberal Ministers. HLRO, Samuel Papers, Diary Notes. (Samuel was Home Secretary.)

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to Lord Beaverbrook by the publisher Lord Riddell after his *War Diary, 1914-1918* appeared in book form: "I have had to expurgate a great deal. After all, one must live! Nevertheless, I am preserving the deleted parts. They may, as you imply, create fresh interest later on!"[5] Thus the old ashes continue to smoulder, as a recent commemorative article on the crisis of 1916 makes clear.[6]

Though sixty years have now passed, the full story of Asquith's fall has yet to be told. As Stephen Koss observed recently, "Despite a veritable outpouring of memoirs, biographies and monographs, discrepancies persist."[7] This article is concerned only with a single aspect of that fascinating episode — namely the failure of Asquith and Lloyd George to reach agreement on a small War Council that would have absolute executive authority to direct Britain's war effort. Here lay the immediate cause of the disruption that severely rocked the ship of state and propelled the Liberal Party faster towards destruction. Had Asquith and Lloyd George agreed on a new arrangement, Britain's history since 1916 would have been very different. For better or worse they did not agree. Of the two principals, Asquith said very little about this failure, either then or later.[8] Lloyd George by contrast said a great deal to contemporaries and committed himself further in print some years afterwards.[9] And most of the others involved in the crisis have had their

5. HLRO, Riddell to Beaverbrook, 1 June 1933. Beaverbrook Papers, C/276. Historians must wait a few more years before Riddell's papers are available for research.

6. *Times*, 4 Dec. 1976. Article by Cameron Hazlehurst: "The part a Cabinet wife played in the bewildering fall of Asquith." The lady in question was Pamela McKenna, wife of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Reginald McKenna. Hazlehurst ventures to suggest that one reason for Asquith's fall was his "ultimate unwillingness to displace McKenna and thereby jeopardize his intimacy with McKenna's wife." This is an interesting though hazardous supposition.

7. Stephen Koss, *Asquith* (London, 1976), p. 221. This is the latest and tidiest account of Asquith's life. Koss's telling of the crisis of 1916 is brief but judicious. See Ch. 9, pp. 214-27.

8. When, towards the end of his life, Asquith wrote *Memories and Reflections* (London, 1928), he was content to print without comment Lord Crewe's account of the crisis written on 20 Dec. 1916 (see Vol. II, 128-38.) It remained for Asquith's biographers, in particular Roy Jenkins in his *Asquith* (London, 1964), to present a fuller version of the story from this side. See Ch. XXVI-XXVII, pp. 421-63.

9. In contrast to Asquith, Lloyd George was far better served by his own pen than by his biographers. The second volume of his *War Memoirs* (London, 1933-36) appeared in 1933, with several chapters devoted to the events of late 1916 (see pp. 832-1005.) He drew extensively on documents to support his own case. Of course by the nineteen-thirties most of the other principals in the crisis were dead. G. M. Trevelyan was moved to comment: "Mr. Lloyd George's great gifts are not strictly historical." *Grey of Fallodon* (London, 1937), p. 255.

More recently Lloyd George has had a strong army of defenders headed by A. J. P. Taylor. Of considerable value for an insight into Lloyd George's mind in late 1916 is Taylor (ed.), *Lloyd George, A Diary by Frances Stevenson* (London, 1971). As secretary and mistress, she occupied a unique vantage point. Far weightier and more objective are the diaries and letters of C. P. Scott who saw much of Lloyd George during these weeks. See Trevor Wilson (ed.), *The Political Diaries of C. P. Scott 1911-1928* (London, 1970). Scott was owner and editor of the *Manchester Guardian*.

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innings or their apologists.[10] The chief fount of information, or gusher, was Lord Beaverbrook, whose *Politicians and the War* has dominated the field for nearly half a century.[11] Even today his words enjoy a remarkable reputation as the best account and interpretation of the 1916 political crisis. Yet it is becoming clear to some historians that this work should be treated as something less than Holy Writ. Debunking, or at the very least redressing, Lord Beaverbrook is long overdue. What follows here, and intended as a partial corrective, focuses on the story that Asquith on December 3 agreed to surrender much of his power to Lloyd George and then went back on his word next day.

Whether the Asquith coalition ministry, that uneasy partnership formed in May 1915 between Liberals and Unionists (with a token Labour member), could have governed Britain much longer in the existing climate of disillusionment and despair hardly matters. In fact it perished abruptly, mysteriously some thought, the victim of neither sudden national crisis nor adverse vote in the House of Commons. From December 1 to 5, 1916, the middle acts of the drama unfolded — Lloyd George's challenge; attempts at a patch-up; the failure of Asquith's defence; his resignation — before a swelling audience that had little inkling of what was going on behind the scenes. It is true that a combination of parliamentary and popular agitation contributed heavily to raising the political temperature, with the press exerting a degree of influence seldom matched before or since. The real catalyst, however, was the coming together of three important figures — Lloyd George, Secretary of State for War and the most dynamic figure in the government; Bonar Law, Colonial Secretary and leader of the Unionist Party; and Sir Edward

10. See chiefly the works by or about Christopher Addison, A. J. Balfour, Bonar Law, Sir Edward Carson, Austen Chamberlain, Geoffrey Dawson, Lord Derby, Robert Donald, King George V, Maurice Hankey, Lord Lansdowne, Lord Milner, Edwin Montagu, Lord Northcliffe, Lord Riddell and C. P. Scott.

Among recent articles that touch upon the fall of Asquith may be mentioned: Cameron Hazlehurst, "Asquith as Prime Minister, 1908-1916," *English Historical Review*, LXXXV (July, 1970), 502-31; P. A. Lockwood, "Milner's Entry into the War Cabinet, December 1916," *The Historical Journal*, VII, No. 1 (1964), 120-34; and Barry McGill, "Asquith's Predicament, 1915-1918," *Journal of Modern History*, XXXIX (Sept. 1967), 283-303.

See also Cameron Hazlehurst, "The Conspiracy Myth" in Martin Gilbert (ed.), *Lloyd George* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968); and Ch. XI in R. J. Scally, *The Origins of the Lloyd George Coalition: The Politics of Social-Imperialism, 1900-1918* (Princeton, 1975).

11. Published originally in two volumes, 1928 and 1932. A one-volume edition was produced in 1960. This work should be read with much caution, as A. J. P. Taylor makes clear in his biography, *Beaverbrook* (London, 1972). Taylor's rectitude as a historian compels him to criticize some of Beaverbrook's methods, for instance pretending a diary existed when there is no evidence of one (pp. 105-06). But his approval of Beaverbrook's role in the end result, Lloyd George's triumph, shines through.

Interestingly, Taylor himself seems to have made no use of the earliest typed draft of Beaverbrook's account, a two-part document styled "Report of Cabinet Crisis 1916" and corrected in Beaverbrook's hand (Beaverbrook Papers, Deed Box 4, Folder XXIV). This reveals clearly how Beaverbrook saw the crisis at the time.

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Carson, Ulster chieftain and *de facto* leader of the Opposition in parliament — into a triumvirate bent upon ending the old regime, meaning the Asquithian system of government. The heart of the matter was the creation of a small, all-powerful council and its composition, especially Lloyd George's place in it.

The history of governmental control in wartime Britain can be sketched briefly. When hostilities broke out in 1914, there had been in existence for more than a decade the Committee of Imperial Defence, but this body was largely consultative and no provision had been made to transform it into the main arm of executive power. Rather, in the first few weeks the cabinet met much more frequently than in peacetime while responsibility for day-to-day operations rested with Lord Kitchener at the War Office and Winston Churchill at the Admiralty. Asquith allowed this strange team a very free rein. By late autumn the Committee of Imperial Defence faded from view when Asquith convened a War Council consisting of himself and several leading members of the cabinet, together with A. J. Balfour (Unionist ex-prime minister) and the Service chiefs. Though a step in the right direction — minutes were taken, decisions were circulated to departments concerned, and Maurice Hankey was appointed secretary — the War Council's relationship to the cabinet was not defined, save that it was subordinate to the parent body. Perhaps the clearest evidence of its limited role was that it met only eighteen times before giving way to a fresh creation, the Dardanelles Committee, in June 1915. In fact at a time of great crisis for British arms the War Council did not meet at all over an eight-week period (March 19 to May 14). Two ministers early perceived the fatal deficiency. On the last day of 1914 Asquith received similar letters from Lloyd George and Winston Churchill, both urging more frequent War Council meetings. Churchill was blunt: "No topic can be pressed to any fruitful result at weekly intervals."[12]

The formation of a coalition government implied a major change in the composition and perhaps also the structure of the War Council. Kitchener would gladly have settled for a three-man executive consisting of Asquith, himself, and Balfour (who had replaced Churchill at the Admiralty), with Hankey as secretary. But in the heated political atmosphere of May 1915 this was quite impracticable. Balfour's Unionist colleagues had not joined Asquith's government only to be excluded from a share of power on the morrow. As a result there came into being the oddly-named Dardanelles Committee, eleven strong, of whom five were Unionists. For several months this body somewhat resembled a small executive, but in the last resort the final word rested with the full

12. Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill*, Vol. III, *1914-1916* (London, 1971), 231.

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cabinet, just as before. Inevitably its numbers increased (to fourteen), further evidence that power was dispersed through many hands. In late summer Asquith, to his credit, considered a new and smaller, presumably more effective, executive to run the war, but others refused to countenance it.

Not that ministers as a whole were content with the Dardanelles Committee. Far from it. By autumn 1915 fresh crises at home and overseas forced another change. Asquith fell ill in October and on the same day Carson resigned from the government in protest against indecision at the top. Other Unionists took this as a cue to launch a chorus of complaints. Perhaps the most interesting suggestion came from Lord Robert Cecil, who looked back to the days of Queen Victoria when they might have trusted the crown to nominate a three-man body to wield absolute power. He added: "As things are I think they would have to be elected by Parliament, or perhaps a H. of C. vote by ballot."[13] One can only sympathize with Asquith. While he lay ill, a stormy cabinet on October 1, at which Lord Crewe presided, reached the "unanimous conviction" that a "drastic change is imperatively necessary."[14] This sounds like kicking a man when he is down, but it had the desired effect. Asquith announced to the Commons on November 2 that a new War Committee of three to five members would supersede the Dardanelles Committee. The effect of this pronouncement was diminished somewhat when Carson drew the attention of the House to the essential weakness, that the new War Committee must fail unless it became the sole executive authority in place of the old cabinet.

Events soon proved that Carson's analysis was correct. It emerged that Asquith had not wielded the surgeon's knife after all. Numbers alone told part of the story. The new War Committee began with three members but this rose to five even before the second meeting took place.[15] Within a fortnight the total increased again to seven cabinet ministers, later nine, and finally eleven (if we include the two who attended regularly on an informal basis). In addition, the two Service chiefs and the secretaries were always present, and usually others as well. To hostile observers this was little more than a balancing act on the part of the prime minister, political considerations taking precedence over efficiency and decisiveness. There was more than a little truth in this. Growth in numbers was symptomatic of the disease that weakened the War Committee and Asquith's hold over it. This can be traced to his

13. Jenkins, *Asquith*, p. 376.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 377.
15. Asquith, Lloyd George, Balfour, Bonar Law, and McKenna; but not, significantly, Lord Kitchener, the War Minister. The names are given incorrectly in Koss, *Asquith*, p. 171.

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unshakeable resolve to leave final responsibility with the full cabinet. So ultimate power continued to reside in the larger body though it had neither agenda nor records, an open invitation to confusion and delay. This was soon demonstrated when the War Committee's decision to evacuate Gallipoli met heavy resistance in cabinet. As Roy Jenkins admits, this sort of thing "obviously made nonsense of the idea of a small effectively functioning War Council [i.e. Committee]."[16] Nor were matters helped by most members of the War Committee having important departments of their own to administer. Inevitably this increased rather than diminished the friction between them. So Britain's leaders stumbled through 1916, tired men with fraying tempers and nerves, whose hardest efforts seemed unable to produce the right formula for victory.

The important thing here is how the year 1916 affected two men: Asquith and Lloyd George. It is easy enough to denigrate Asquith, and many writers have indulged in this sport with more gusto than discrimination. Certainly his shortcomings as leader in an age of total war can be identified without difficulty. Very evident was his faith in the old peacetime system of government and in his own (and Britain's) ability to muddle through. In the Commons on November 2, 1915, he admitted that there was much to be said in wartime "for having one, or it may be more — at any rate one — comparatively small body of men who will deal with the daily exigencies of the State." But he added:

> At the same time, it should be understood that the Cabinet, which, as a body, has the ultimate responsibility for questions of policy, shall be kept, not only constantly informed of the decisions and actions of the Committee, but in all questions which involve a change, or a new departure in policy, should be consulted before decisive action is taken.[17]

All might have been well for Asquith if the next twelve months had produced substantial victories in the field. They did not. The year 1916 yielded only Jutland and the Somme, the one a blow to British pride, and the other, infinitely worse, the profligate wastage of British blood. Nobody knew how to win the war, not even Lloyd George though he and others were eager to try. Some suspected that the war could not be won. Lord Beaverbrook summed up prevailing attitudes in four terse sentences: "The politicians gave little credit to the generals. The generals denounced the politicians. The soldiers and sailors serving in the forces had little confidence in either. The public had no heroes."[18] In

16. Jenkins, *Asquith*, p. 385.
17. Lord Hankey, *The Supreme Command* (London, 1961), II, 439-40.
18. Lord Beaverbrook, *Men and Power* (London, 1956), Introd., p. xi.

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this climate of disillusionment both cabinet and War Committee deteriorated as Asquith struggled to keep his colleagues together and keep the upper hand. His longhand reports to the King, the sole official record of cabinet deliberations and decisions, reveal little of the inner workings of the prime minister's mind. The calm phrases contained no hint of vital issues unresolved, no whisper of the clash of strong personalities, no augury that an era was coming to an end. It seemed as if the writer did not believe there was anything worthwhile to report, or in more than cursory terms. Yet Hankey's diaries and Asquith's personal letters convey a different impression of his state of mind. Unquestionably his chairmanship was bad, for he allowed his colleagues a latitude in discussion that was terribly inappropriate to this time of trial. And since Asquith could neither drive nor lead, the government's downhill slide gathered momentum. At the beginning of November 1916 he remarked, with a curious but not untypical mixture of irritation and indifference, that there were "some six resignations looming." Outwardly he seemed as unperturbed as ever. One historian described Asquith thus: "The last of the Romans, as he was once described, sits presiding week after week in the Cabinet room, courteous, lucid, powerful and serene."[19] Over-drawn, no doubt, but many people had this image of their prime minister.

Lloyd George, by contrast, was visibly nearing the point of breaking loose from, and perhaps destroying, the Asquithian system of government. For him 1916 had been a year of mounting frustration. His great work at the Ministry of Munitions lay well in the past; conscription, which he had championed, was an accomplished fact; Ireland provided momentary diversion when he nearly achieved the miracle of a settlement, but that ended in failure. Then following Kitchener's death on June 5, Lloyd George took the War Office. This was a poor inheritance, though historians are fond of quoting Mrs. Asquith's somewhat hysterical words.[20] In fact the office of Secretary for War was but a shadow of its former greatness. Lloyd George himself had been largely responsible for making Munitions a separate ministry, while control of strategy passed into the hands of the Chief of the Imperial General Staff in December 1915. The incumbent, doughty General Robertson, had no intention of surrendering that control now, least of all to a civilian he considered unsound on such matters. What remained to Lloyd George in his new post was routine administration and a running battle in War Committee and cabinet on the grand strategy of the war (he was an

19. Robert Blake, *The Unknown Prime Minister* (London, 1955), p. 297.

20. "We are out: it can only be a question of time now when we shall have to leave Downing Street." Margot Asquith, *An Autobiography* (London, 1920, 1922), II, 245. Mrs. Asquith's instincts were better than her husband's.

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enthusiastic 'Easterner', anathema to the generals and most Ministers.) The irony of it all was that to much of the press and public he had emerged as the one politician dedicated heart and soul to fighting the war with energy and determination. Little did they guess that his faith in ultimate victory was far from perfect, that more than once in 1916 he privately expressed doubts about the Allies' chances.[21]

Outwardly, however, Lloyd George continued to exude a confidence that few shared and events belied. As the nation's spirits sank after Jutland and the Somme, 'Hedgers' and 'Ditchers' appeared in a new form.[22] Lord Lansdowne was the most prominent figure in the first group while Lloyd George was the darling of the second. The latter's image as another Pitt was strengthened in September 1916 when his 'Knock-out-Blow' interview with an American journalist achieved instant fame. The message was simple in the extreme: no negotiated peace, rather a fight to the finish. Some of his more cautious colleagues, Grey foremost, were alarmed at this casual denial of an alternative, especially in light of recent moves in both the United States and Germany. When Asquith canvassed the cabinet for their opinions, he received a frankly pessimistic answer from Lansdowne. This in turn produced a magisterial rebuke from Lord Robert Cecil, aimed at Lansdowne and several Liberal ministers who likewise appeared to be inclining to the idea of a negotiated settlement. The net result was to damage still further the now fragile cabinet unity that Asquith sought to preserve. Out of this situation came the British initiative for an Allied conference in Paris in mid-November to discuss war strategy and diplomacy. Lloyd George saw here a great opportunity for Britain to break out of the impasse and accordingly he prepared a lengthy memorandum to serve as the basis for Asquith's presentation at the conference. In tone surprisingly similar to Lansdowne's document, it somehow managed to avoid sounding defeatist by pressing for a breakthrough in the East, meaning Salonika. His document was ruthlessly excised by the prime minister who feared it might exacerbate relations with Britain's generals and Allies alike. From Lloyd George's side this was bad enough. Far worse was the failure of the Paris conference to achieve anything meaningful, while simultaneously the army chiefs at Chantilly were reaffirming their determination to continue fighting the war in the same old way and, it may be added, in the same old place. 'Westerners' had triumphed again. When Lloyd George learnt this, he saw before him two choices: resignation or rebellion.

Events now moved rapidly towards the climax in early December.

21. Meaning under the present Allied leadership.
22. To borrow the terms applied to rival factions of Tories during the struggle over the Parliament Bill.

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Even before the Paris conference Lloyd George had made his opening move, encouraged by the celebrated 'Nigeria Debate' of November 8 when Tory back-benchers rebelled (but unsuccessfully) against the government and against their own leader Bonar Law. On November 13 he enlisted a willing ally in the person of Sir Max Aitken, the future Lord Beaverbrook. A member of parliament, the intimate friend of Bonar Law and on good terms with Winston Churchill and F. E. Smith (the Attorney General), a rising power in Fleet Street — Aitken was a good catch. He had no illusions about the Asquith coalition and so listened eagerly to Lloyd George's "harangue" (Aitken's own word). This was almost entirely a recital of complaints, with Asquith's deficiencies high on the list. He was "dilatory and indecisive;" the government as constituted was "an ineffective weapon for fighting the war and reorganization was essential;" 'Peace by Negotiation' threatened Britain with ignominy and defeat; Robertson's control of strategy left him no real power at the War Office (this at great length); etc., etc. The desired end was "a small War Council free from the 'dead hand' of Asquith's inertia," and this could be achieved by agreement between himself, Bonar Law, and Sir Edward Carson.[23]

The seeds thus planted began to germinate almost at once. Next day, November 14, Aitken dropped the first hint to Bonar Law about what was percolating in Lloyd George's mind. The Unionist leader was not amused. He had little reason to trust Lloyd George, and now it appeared that the power-hungry Secretary for War was scheming to shove Sir William Robertson aside, possibly even Asquith himself. Aitken's initial attempts to arrange a meeting between Lloyd George and Bonar Law have a touch of comic opera about them, but on November 20 he proved his worth as a go-between by bringing together for the first time these two leaders and Carson as well. The next great step was the preparation of a document for Asquith's eyes, setting forth the proposed arrangement for a small War Council with Lloyd George as chairman and Asquith some sort of remote sovereign authority. But the prime minister had few illusions where his volatile lieutenant was concerned. He wrote Bonar Law a long letter on November 26 refusing to buy the triumvirate's scheme: "There is one construction, and one only," said Asquith, "that could be put on the new arrangement — that it has been engineered by him [Lloyd George] with the purpose, not perhaps at the moment but as soon as a fitting pretext could be found, of his displacing me."[24]

This was something of a facer and gave the triumvirate occasion to

23. Beaverbrook, *Politicians and the War*, II, 110-24.
24. Blake, *The Unknown Prime Minister*, p. 307.

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pause. Now it was the prime minister's turn to make a move. He reported to the King after the cabinet meeting of November 29: "It was after discussion considered desirable to set up, side by side with the War Committee, another Cabinet committee to deal with domestic questions of national organization for the purposes of war."[25] This proposal, according to Edwin Montagu (Minister of Munitions), was put forward by Lord Robert Cecil, but Asquith was quick to seize upon it, seeing here a means of fencing Lloyd George in while there was yet time. Other cabinet ministers made encouraging noises, though it seems that the scheme was hastily conceived and clumsily presented. Yet the main point was clear: henceforth there would be two bodies, a 'War Committee' and a 'Civil Committee', where formerly there had been one. Much vaguer was the question of personnel, and Hankey got the impression that Lloyd George was to be chairman of the 'Civil Committee'. This is puzzling. Did Lloyd George sit silent in cabinet and passively accept a scheme that could only be abhorrent to him since it would greatly reduce his influence on war policy? It will never be known for certain what happened since there were no minutes other than Asquith's brief report to the King. Doubtless Asquith left the cabinet room considerably cheered at the prospect of circumventing another crisis. Then, too, he perceived that all was not perfect harmony between Bonar Law and his Unionist colleagues, of which there would be plenty of evidence before another twenty-four hours had passed. If Lloyd George could not be appeased in this fashion, at least Asquith had the satisfaction of knowing that the next move was up to the Secretary for War. Of these goings-on in cabinet on November 29, Lord Beaverbrook was quite unaware, even when he published his book fifteen years later.

Bonar Law was now in serious trouble. The essence of the Lloyd George plan was an all-powerful War Council of three or four men with full executive authority to run the war; yet the cabinet had agreed to two committees instead of the present one, at least in principle. Cabinet reconstruction might proceed along one line or the other, but hardly both. Some explaining was called for, and fast, before the other Unionist ministers discovered that their leader was in league with Lloyd George and Carson behind the cabinet's back. Accordingly Bonar Law gathered his colleagues together the very next day, November 30. They were astounded to learn of the plan for a small War Council with Lloyd George in the driver's seat. It was "simply a scheme for the further aggrandisement of Lloyd George, and they were absolutely determined not to proclaim a dictatorship with Lloyd George as dictator."[26] Or as

25. PRO, Asquith to the King, 30 Nov. 1916, CAB 41/37/42.
26. Beaverbrook, *Politicians and the War*, II, 161.

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Lord Robert Cecil put it, "Bonar Law was ruining the Conservative Party by dragging it at the coat tails of Lloyd George."[27] Faced with such uncompromising hostility, Bonar Law began to back away from his commitment to the Secretary for War. Firm evidence for this is to be found in a letter from Lord Curzon to Lord Lansdowne on December 3, where he spoke of "the arrangement (of two Committees) mentioned at the last Cabinet and agreed to at our last meeting in Bonar Law's room."[28] It is interesting that Bonar Law made no mention of the November 30 meeting in a lengthy "Statement" on the political crisis which he dictated at the end of December 1916.[29] Beaverbrook on the other hand devoted twenty-two pages to reconstructing the scene and the arguments Bonar Law is supposed to have employed.[30] He labored hard to make Bonar Law look better.

Lloyd George had to act quickly if he was not going to lose Bonar Law altogether. On Friday, December 1, he prepared a five-point memorandum for presentation to Asquith. This was much more specific than the triumvirate's earlier document, stating that the War Council should consist of three members only, of whom two were to be the Secretary for War and the First Lord of the Admiralty. Where did this leave Asquith? The second and third points allowed little to the imagination: "The War Committee [i.e. Council] shall have full power, subject to the supreme control of the Prime Minister, to direct all questions connected with the war;" and "The Prime Minister in his discretion to have the power to refer any question to the Cabinet."[31] Practically this meant that executive power for running the war would be vested in Lloyd George's three-man War Council. No record exists of what passed between Asquith and his lieutenant when this was unfolded, but it must have been abundantly clear that here was an ultimatum whose rejection would be followed by resignation. When Bonar Law learnt of this document, he was taken aback at Lloyd George's audacity. He dreaded having to choose between the two Liberals, yet this decision now confronted him. Asquith's formal reply was written the same day, December 1. He stated flatly that "whatever changes are made in the composition or functions of the War Committee the Prime Minister must be its Chairman. He cannot be relegated to the position of an arbiter in the background or a referee to the Cabinet." He agreed that a small War Council should include the Secretary for War and the First Lord, but it should be rounded out by adding the Minister of Munitions and

27. *Ibid.*, 164.
28. Lord Newton, *Lord Lansdowne* (London, 1929), p. 452.
29. HLRO, Bonar Law Papers, 85/A/1.
30. Beaverbrook, *Politicians and the War*, II, 160-81.
31. HLRO, Lloyd George Papers, E/2/23/9.

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one other, preferably without departmental responsibilities. The "delicate and difficult question of personnel" he purposely did not touch, thus avoiding the problem of Carson. Finally, lest it appear he had shifted his ground: "The reconstruction of the War Committee should be accompanied by the setting up of a Committee of National Organization, to deal with the purely domestic side of our problems. It should have executive power within its own domain."[32] Thus did Asquith commit himself even more firmly to the two-committee idea.

In his *War Memoirs* Lloyd George described this reply as "entirely unsatisfactory."[33] Realizing that he had reached the point of no return, he wasted little time on December 2 in preparing for the break that now seemed inevitable. Already two popular morning newspapers, the *Daily Chronicle* and the *Daily Express,* had been primed by Aitken, doubtless with Lloyd George's blessing, with the word that cabinet reconstruction was imminent.[34] Bonar Law was whipped into line by an appeal to his patriotism. A draft letter of resignation was prepared, though Lloyd George was careful not to reveal this weapon just yet. And while the week-end calm settled over Westminster and Whitehall, he embarked upon a series of interviews with important people — politicians and others — whose support he would need in the days ahead. Among them was the mighty Lord Northcliffe, proprietor of *The Times* and the *Daily Mail,* while the influential Liberal editor C. P. Scott of the *Manchester Guardian* was summoned from his northern stronghold. Max Aitken, needless to say, was very much on the spot. Last but by no means least in Lloyd George's string of visitors on this Saturday afternoon was Sir Henry Dalziel, owner of *Reynolds's Newspaper,* a popular weekly which normally dispensed a non-political brand of titillation. Dalziel was an old Radical crony of Lloyd George's who could be relied upon to give the present scheme a hearty shove. He joined in with enthusiasm. Next morning *Reynolds's,* alone among Sunday newspapers, came out with the sensational headline that Lloyd George was going to resign, and it was implied that Bonar Law would probably accompany him. This set the stage for the final act.

Dalziel's revelation produced a violent reaction in Unionist ranks.

32. Ibid., E/2/23/10.

33. II, 985. Lloyd George added: "The Prime Minister's counter proposal would effect no improvement and hardly any change in the position as it stood. The Prime Minister was to preside over the Committee and any Ministers dissatisfied with any of its decisions were entitled to appeal to the Cabinet before any steps were taken to carry them out. Then what about the Committee of National Organization which was to be set up quite independently of the War Committee to deal with the purely domestic side of War problems?"

34. Beaverbrook's financial interest in the *Daily Express* secured that outlet. The roundabout way in which he primed the *Daily Chronicle,* and his reasons, are described in Taylor, *Beaverbrook,* pp. 113-14.

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Earlier Bonar Law had scheduled a meeting with several of his principal colleagues for that Sunday morning, December 3, and they arrived in high indignation that such a bombshell had been dropped into a delicate political situation. It seemed that with cabinet reconstruction inevitable they and their party were hopelessly compromised by a feat which Lloyd George had engineered for his own purposes, Bonar Law being but a pawn. At this point Lord Beaverbrook's account of the crisis must be scrutinized with special care. He claimed that Bonar Law's visitors — Lord Curzon, Austen Chamberlain, Lord Robert Cecil, Walter Long — were "more Royalist than the King. They determined not only to support the Prime Minister against Lloyd George, but to compel the Prime Minister to advance far beyond his own intentions in a vigorous counter-offensive which was to turn Lloyd George out of the Cabinet."[35] The evidence, however, points to a very different conclusion. Far from thinking that Asquith was the indispensable man who should be strongly backed against Lloyd George's challenge, they believed that the truly indispensable figures were themselves, without whom neither Liberal leader could possibly form a government. Knowing that none of their own number could become prime minister, they determined to strive for an arrangement in which they would have maximum influence. But this placed them in a dilemma. To throw their full support behind Asquith in an attempt to destroy Lloyd George might be disastrous, since there was clear evidence that the Asquith ship was sinking. On the other hand could they back Lloyd George, whom they cordially distrusted and disliked? Up to a point they could, but not if it meant making Lloyd George a virtual dictator with such right-hand men as Carson and Northcliffe, whom they disliked even more.

It comes as no surprise that the result of this Unionist meeting was a peculiarly murky four-point document which Bonar Law was to deliver to Asquith that same afternoon. Much ink has been spilled over this, but the essential point was the call to Asquith to resign. "This action," Bonar Law admitted later, "was proposed mainly on the ground that the Unionist members of the cabinet did not wish to have their position forced by the action of Lloyd George."[36] Clearly there was a considerable gulf between the Unionist leader and his four colleagues, but not because he wanted Lloyd George to lead and they wanted Asquith. What they feared was that a new arrangement might be made between Lloyd George and Asquith, with Bonar Law weakly acquiescing, while they themselves remained little more than bystanders. Such a denouement was totally unacceptable, for then the notion of their in-

35. Beaverbrook, *Politicians and the War*, II, 210.
36. Bonar Law's "Statement" of 30 Dec. 1916.

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dispensability would be shown to have no substance. Roy Jenkins is mistaken in describing Curzon, Chamberlain, Cecil, and Long as "not knowing quite what they wanted" and therefore unable to exert much influence on events.[37] They knew what they wanted; what perplexed them was that they did not know how to achieve it. And as a result the formula adopted at Bonar Law's house was a masterpiece of ambiguity.

Whatever passed between Bonar Law and Asquith when the Unionist leader confronted the prime minister on Sunday afternoon — and arguments still rage over this — one thing seems clear: Asquith got the impression that the Unionist call for the government's resignation betokened their mass desertion from his side. In fact, as is now known, all of them except Bonar Law were at least as indifferent to Lloyd George's fate as to Asquith's, possibly more. Churchill commented in the margin of Beaverbrook's proofs that the prime minister "took the Tory resolution as a hostile move in spite of B.L.s explanation, whereas it was the reverse. This is what frightened him."[38] To say that it was "the reverse" is a bit strong, but Churchill was certainly right about the effect upon Asquith. He was frightened for his own position. Now it was a matter of extreme urgency for him to work out some *modus vivendi* with Lloyd George before there was a complete smash. At his side were two troubled Liberal colleagues, Lord Crewe and Edwin Montagu, and they counselled compromise. A hurried call to Lloyd George, who had forsaken London for his semi-rural retreat at Walton Heath in Surrey — (which prompted Asquith to remark drily: "That is the man of quick action.") — brought the Secretary for War back to town that afternoon. But he stopped at the War Office before proceeding to Downing Street and an historic interview with Asquith, pausing to rehearse his arguments in the presence of Max Aitken. "He lit a cigar and considered impartially the interview which lay before him," wrote Beaverbrook. "I had never seen any man exhibit so much moral courage in the face of such great events."[39] Here was a nice touch. Lloyd George calmly smoking a cigar at this moment was, in Beaverbrook's mind at least, fit to rank with such great legends as Francis Drake finishing his game of bowls.

What happened was anti-climactic. As nearly as can be determined (for there were no others present), Asquith was not faced down by his chief attacker nor did Lloyd George come to heel. Instead two old colleagues discussed a difficult situation with remarkably little heat or rancor. Montagu described their talk as "long and very friendly,"[40] though

37. Jenkins, *Asquith*, p. 438.
38. HLRO, Beaverbrook Papers, Deed Box 4, Folder XIV.
39. Beaverbrook, *Politicians and the War*, II, 228.
40. Montagu's account of the crisis. Interview with Robert Donald, editor of the *Daily Chronicle*, on 27 Feb. 1917. HLRO, Beaverbrook Papers, Deed Box 4, Folder V.

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of course he was not in the room and wishful thinking may have colored his words somewhat, since he dreaded having to choose between the two. Certainly the circumstances favored compromise. Asquith had been alarmed by the Bonar Law interview and the prospect of mass Unionist resignations, while Lloyd George did not want a duel to the death with his old chief if he could win on the main point. In this atmosphere some dramatic change in the top level of government seemed assured. Long afterwards Lloyd George was to write: "At the interview which ensued Mr. Asquith and I discussed the whole situation in the friendliest spirit and ultimately came to a complete understanding."[41]

It might be closer to the truth to say that a complete *mis*understanding had been reached. On the matter of establishing a small War Council there appears to have been little disagreement in principle, and it is easy to say that Asquith capitulated readily to Lloyd George's demands because he had little choice. Here most historians have followed the Beaverbrook line quite uncritically. But this is to ignore the obvious question: did Asquith really intend to hand over without a struggle the full direction of the war to Lloyd George and two such quantities as Bonar Law and Carson? It strains one's credulity to think so. Yet Lloyd George could have jumped to this conclusion. Already he was beginning to see himself as the new Pitt. Whether Asquith was so ready to play the role of Newcastle is far from clear. Certainly the letter he wrote next day, recapitulating the terms of the verbal agreement, suggests that he was fighting hard to retain as much real power as possible. It must therefore be asked whether Asquith under duress made an arrangement to surrender the substance of power to Lloyd George and then went back on his word within twenty-four hours. He may have done so. More likely Lloyd George in his eagerness to reach an amicable settlement of the crisis badly misjudged the extent of Asquith's intention to become a mere *roi faineant.* The fact that Lord Crewe, at the prime minister's behest, spent Sunday evening studying the 'two-committee scheme' and the implications of dividing responsibility for the war between two small groups of ministers, leaves room for skepticism about the story of Asquith's complete surrender.[42] Lloyd George and Beaverbrook to the contrary, there is reason to doubt if the two Liberal leaders came remotely close to a genuine understanding on the division of power.

On the second point, personnel, Asquith and Lloyd George clearly

41. *War Memoirs*, II, 987.

42. Was Asquith so befuddled at this point in the crisis that he could not grasp that he was bargaining away his power? Such a theory is not in keeping with his record as prime minister.

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got nowhere. Robert Donald, editor of the *Daily Chronicle,* noted after an interview with Asquith on December 7: "A strong difference of opinion developed on the suggested personnel of the War Council, and that matter was left for adjustment on Monday."[43] Hankey's account was fuller:

> Ll.G. insisted on Balfour's leaving the Adty. He himself intended to remain S. of S. for War, and he saw that the First Lord in this event must also be a member, but he would not agree to Balfour. The only reason he gave for this was 'too much wool', but in my opinion he wants to be virtually 'Dictator' and Balfour is too strong and dialectically too skilful to allow this. The P.M. however is in a difficult position in getting rid of Balfour, because, when he forced him a week or two ago to substitute Jellicoe for Jackson as First Sea Lord, he added his strong wish that Balfour should remain in office.[44]

There was a little more to it than this. Lloyd George also wanted Balfour out so that there would be a place for Carson on the new War Council. Asquith objected to this on two counts: not only did he feel some obligation to keep Balfour, but, more serious, he had no belief in Carson's ability to head such an important ministry. Nor did he rate Bonar Law highly as a key member of a war government, or Arthur Henderson either for that matter, and they were both important in Lloyd George's scheme of things. Beaverbrook attempted to dismiss this matter of personalities as of little importance: "It did not, however, appear likely that the negotiations would break down on the question of personnel."[45] On the contrary, it is entirely possible, even probable, that this would have wrecked everything quite apart from other considerations. Had Asquith accepted unquestioningly Lloyd George's nominees, he would have faced a violent storm from other Unionist and Liberal ministers who thought their own claims for inclusion were at least as good if not better than those of Carson and Law. Yet Lloyd George could hardly ditch one or both of his fellow triumvirs at this stage. Opposite Beaverbrook's remark about personnel Churchill commented in the proofs: "Query: L.G. was willing to throw over Carson? Surely not."[46]

The discussion between prime minister and War Minister on this Sunday afternoon, December 3, lasted more than an hour, at the end of which Bonar Law was summoned to join them. Before the Unionist

43. H. A. Taylor, *Robert Donald* (London, 1934), p. 119.
44. S. Roskill, *Hankey, Man of Secrets* (London, 1970-74), II, 325.
45. Beaverbrook, *Politicians and the War,* II, 229.
46. HLRO, Beaverbrook Papers, Deed Box 4, Folder XIV. Such a comment from one so experienced as Churchill cannot be dismissed lightly.

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leader arrived, Lloyd George came out and had a few words separately with Montagu and Hankey, who were waiting in Bonham Carter's room with several others.[47] Until this moment Montagu had had high hopes for his own inclusion in a new War Council, but now he learnt that a place must be given to Henderson, a bitter disappointment to an ambitious man. Next Lloyd George spoke to Hankey and let drop a puzzling remark: "Ll. George then told me that the Unionists had insisted that he should become Prime Minister, but he had flatly declined, and had insisted that he would only serve under Asquith."[48] There is no reason to believe that Hankey, the perfect secretary, can have misreported Lloyd George's words, for such a comment would have made an indelible impression on his mind. Why should the Secretary for War have said such a thing at this particular moment? Since there is no evidence whatever to support his claim that "the Unionists insisted that he should become Prime Minister," it appears that he was using this fiction to justify to himself his sudden reconciliation with Asquith. Loyalty to persons, whether superiors, colleagues or subordinates, was not a quality for which Lloyd George was renowned. His remark therefore has a curiously hollow sound.

Bonar Law arrived and spent the next half hour with Asquith and Lloyd George, at the end of which it was agreed that the government would be reconstructed so as to provide for a small War Council. As in May 1915 all members of the cabinet were to submit their resignations so that the prime minister might start with a clean slate. The one fixed point of departure was that Lloyd George should chair the new council. Whether anything was said about a 'Civil Committee', as agreed upon at Wednesday's cabinet, will never be known. All the evidence comes from one side only — Lloyd George and Bonar Law — and they had little interest in such a body anyway. Unfortunately for Asquith's case he said nothing later to shed any light on the mystery. Even if the Sunday afternoon discussions included no mention of a 'Civil Committee', the arrangement to reconstruct the government in the manner proposed left it somewhat unclear in whose hands the substance of power would lie. Lack of precision on this point may have been a serious error on Lloyd George's part at this stage, but it is hard to see how he could have pressed his claims further just then. Evidently he thought the chairmanship of the War Council gave him the direction of the war. Asquith, though forced to concede much, seems to have thought otherwise. As prime minister he could attempt to balance offices and personalities as he had done before in times of crisis. Here lay the root

47. Maurice Bonham Carter was Asquith's Private Secretary and son-in-law.
48. Roskill, *Hankey, Man of Secrets*, II, 325. In Jenkins, *Asquith* (p. 441), this appears as "would only serve with Asquith."

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cause of the misunderstanding that blossomed in the next forty-eight hours. But for the time being all was sweetness and, if not light, at least suggestive of a new dawn. As Lloyd George and Bonar Law were leaving the Downing Street meeting, they happened to pass the Liberal Chief Whip. Lloyd George remarked genially: "You need not get your writs ready, Gulland; there will be no General Election."[49] This was a reminder of his threat, published that morning in *Reynolds's Newspaper,* to take the issue to the British people.

The two partners now proceeded to the War Office, and shortly afterwards Bonar Law departed for F. E. Smith's house. There he informed those Unionist ministers who had remained in town that Asquith was going to reconstruct the government and establish a small War Council with Lloyd George as chairman. In the light of this the matter of their resignation *en masse* if Asquith failed to resign (as envisaged in their Sunday morning resolutions) became irrelevant. Perhaps F. E. Smith welcomed these tidings, as he had feared a wholesale smash, but to the others it came as a rude shock on Sunday evening to learn that Asquith and Lloyd George were reconciled and Bonar Law had given his unqualified blessing. However this new arrangement might work in practice, it seemed perfectly clear that the already modest influence of the Unionist ministers on policy-making would be diminished still further. Austen Chamberlain's testimony is eloquent on this point:

> Lloyd George had proposed a Committee consisting of Bonar Law, Carson, Henderson and himself. I certainly would not have served under such a Committee nor would Curzon or Cecil. We have little confidence in Bonar Law's judgment and none in his strength of character. Carson was a great disappointment in the three months during which he sat in Asquith's cabinet. He is an Irish sentimentalist as Lloyd George is a Welsh one. He and Bonar Law would merely have emphasized Lloyd George's failings whilst echoing his views, and these are known to have been at variance more than once with those of the General Staff and Commander-in-Chief on questions relating to the larger strategy of the war. It was very proper to include Henderson as a representative of Labour . He is a very good fellow, but on all the larger issues of policy he would have been a cipher.[50]

To men like Chamberlain it looked like May 1915 all over again. In name a coalition, but in fact two powerful Liberal leaders arranging things to suit themselves, and to the great disadvantage of the Unionists, while their own leader uttered not a word of protest. Of course

49. Montagu interview with Robert Donald, 27 Feb. 1917.
50. Austen Chamberlain, *Down the Years* (London, 1935), p. 121.

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Chamberlain's reasoning presupposed that the War Council was to be given supreme direction of the war. But perhaps that was not Asquith's intention at all. The Unionist ministers knew him well enough to doubt that he would tamely surrender to Lloyd George's dictation. Suddenly the prime minister looked very attractive to this little group as they saw themselves threatened with virtual oblivion. What they did next is far from clear, however. Many years later when recalling these events, Chamberlain stated most emphatically that the first and only meeting between themselves and Asquith took place on Tuesday, December 5.[51] Against this must be set other evidence which strongly suggests that an important meeting did take place between Asquith and several leading Unionist ministers (including Chamberlain) on Sunday evening. Edwin Montagu's account of these hours said that "only in the course of conversation and of a further talk with Curzon, Robert Cecil and Austen Chamberlain did it appear that the Unionists wished the Government to be reconstructed under Asquith."[52] Ignoring for the moment what these ministers wished to accomplish by this tactic, Montagu's words imply that 'the three C.s' talked with Asquith shortly after the Unionist meeting at F. E. Smith's house. This is confirmed by Robert Donald who noted in his diary for Sunday: "Lord Curzon and some other Unionist members also saw Asquith and pointed out to him the advantages of the policy which they suggested."[53] Donald, we may add, spent more than an hour at Downing Street on Sunday evening, much of the time in conversation with Bonham Carter, the prime minister's private secretary. On December 20, the Liberal editor asked Bonham Carter for his recollections of the crisis and was told: "Mr. Asquith had a visit during the evening from the anti-George members of the Conservative Party, who explained that their resolution asking him to resign was intended to be helpful — to give him a free hand in a reconstruction scheme. Curzon was one of the Ministers referred to."[54] Then there is Lord Crewe, whose version of Sunday's events included the comment that "it appeared that a large measure of reconstruction would satisfy the Unionist Ministers."[55] Again this implies that they were with Asquith some time during these hours.

The point is an important one, for it supports the contention that

51. See the exchange of letters between Chamberlain and Beaverbrook in May and June, 1932. HLRO, Beaverbrook Papers, C/79: University of Birmingham, Austen Chamberlain Papers, AC/15/3/28,29,33,34,40,41. Beaverbrook was not satisfied with Chamberlain's explanation.

52. S. D. Waley, *Edwin Montagu, A Memoir* (London, 1964), p. 106. Montagu's papers, which were open for a time, have been closed again to researchers.

53. Taylor, *Robert Donald*, p. 116.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 125.

55. Oxford and Asquith, *Memories and Reflections*, II, 132. Crewe's account of the crisis.

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Asquith and Lloyd George had reached no real understanding about the machinery of government during their Sunday afternoon discussion. This of course is diametrically opposed to the authorized, or Beaverbrook, version. (Another possibility, that Asquith intentionally deceived Lloyd George so as to buy time, is scarcely worth a moment's thought.) One can only guess, but it seems probable that when Asquith met with 'the three C.s' on Sunday evening they discussed the two-committee scheme which first arose in cabinet on the previous Wednesday. Only some such arrangement as this, assuming that the unworkability of the old system was accepted all round, would satisfy the Unionist ministers that Lloyd George was not going to emerge with dictatorial powers over Britain's war policy. Such at least is one conclusion to be drawn from Crewe's exercise Sunday evening and throughout Monday, when he constructed for Asquith's benefit a plan that centered (in his own words) on a 'War Committee' and an 'Administration Committee', with the prime minister as 'President' of both. With Curzon and Cecil mentioned as possible members of such a 'War Committee', while Runciman, McKenna, and Chamberlain were suggested for the other, Lloyd George and Carson would be nicely counterbalanced, if not nullified, by men closer to Asquith's desires.[56]

For the remainder of Sunday all was tranquil in high places. Edwin Montagu saw Lloyd George at the War Office and noted that the Secretary for War "expressed his great gratification at the fact that he was going to work with Asquith." He also urged Montagu "to persuade Asquith to put the agreement in writing that night," a sensible precaution in the circumstances.[57] Montagu's satisfaction at the apparent rapprochement between the Liberal chieftains was tempered somewhat when, on leaving Lloyd George, he noticed Lord Northcliffe waiting in an anteroom. He drew the obvious conclusion when next day's edition of *The Times* rejoiced that Lloyd George had defeated Asquith, though in fact the celebrated leading article of December 4 owed its inspiration to other sources.[58] Bonar Law meanwhile had gone from the War Office to the Unionist meeting at F. E. Smith's house. On receipt of the news that Asquith and Lloyd George were reconciled the others departed, but Bonar Law remained behind to write Asquith a short note advising him to issue an immediate formal announcement that the government was to be reconstructed. He urged this because "it is almost certain that

56. Bodleian Library, Oxford, Crewe to Asquith, 4 Dec. 1916, Asquith Papers, MS 17.

57. Jenkins, *Asquith*, p. 442.

58. Stanley Morison stated categorically in *The History of 'The Times'*, IV, Part 1 (London, 1952), 297, that most of the leading article had been written by Geoffrey Dawson on Saturday while staying with the Astors at Cliveden, while the final touches were added Sunday evening after Dawson had talked with Sir Edward Carson. This is confirmed by other sources

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it will be stated in the papers to-morrow that the Unionist Ministers have sent in their resignations."[59] Thus the Unionist meeting at Smith's house cannot have been the harmonious little affair of Beaverbrook's account. Bonar Law's news had unfolded a prospect that was far from palatable to men like Chamberlain and Cecil, least of all to Lord Curzon. Therefore an evening visit to Asquith would follow logically enough.

Additional light on their thinking comes from another source. During these Sunday hours Lord Robert Cecil sought out his cousin A. J. Balfour, who had taken no part in the day's events. According to Blanche Dugdale, Balfour's niece and early biographer, "most of the Unionist Ministers had hardened their feelings against Mr. Lloyd George" because of the *Reynolds's* article that morning. "They had come to the conclusion that reconstruction from within was not possible after this, and had urged Mr. Asquith to tender the resignation of the Government to the King."[60] She meant of course the resolutions passed at their morning meeting with Bonar Law. Asquith's own resignation must be submitted along with the others. "The effect of this would be an open trial of strength between the Prime Minister and Mr. Lloyd George." One marvels at such fastidious men playing this kind of game, but at least they were realistic in believing that the last-minute reconciliation between Asquith and Lloyd George had no substance. One or other must command, not both. If Asquith could continue without Lloyd George, 'the three C.s' would be more necessary to the coalition than ever. If Lloyd George emerged on top, then, as Curzon phrased it to Lansdowne, "His Government will be dictated to him by others, not shaped exclusively by himself."[61] Such reasoning seemed flawless to 'the three C.s' and Long. Yet it is interesting that the wily Balfour, himself an ex-prime minister, kept his thoughts to himself and let Cecil talk. It must be added, however, that Balfour did not remain silent for long, and for reasons that were foreshadowed as long ago as October 1915. Even at that early date in the history of the Asquith coalition, Balfour "reserved to himself full liberty of action should there be a serious split in the cabinet with consequent resignations."[62] That time had now come. His two letters to Asquith of Tuesday, December 5, signalled his intention (which Asquith failed to grasp) to back Lloyd George as war leader. This action, together with a similar decision by the Labour party, made it possible for Lloyd George to become prime minister with astonishing ease.

59. Bodl., Bonar Law to Asquith, 3 Dec. 1916, Asquith Papers, MS 31.
60. Blanche E. C. Dugdale, *Arthur James Balfour* (London, 1936), II, 169.
61. Newton, *Lord Lansdowne*, p. 453.
62. Kenneth Young, *Arthur James Balfour* (London, 1963), p. 365.

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To get back to the events of Sunday evening, December 3, it looked to Lloyd George as if the battle was already won. He went to Arthur Lee's house for a quiet dinner, and his hostess noted that he appeared "very tired after a day of great tension and nothing settled yet, although it looks as though Asquith had given in."[63] If Lloyd George, and Bonar Law too, chose to relax in private at the end of this strenuous day, Asquith by contrast was quite gregarious. He dined with Edwin Montagu at Queen Anne's Gate, and afterwards they were joined by Lord Crewe and Lord Reading. Now Asquith let drop a remark that he "contemplated putting Runciman at the Admiralty, in the reconstructed Government."[64] Assuming that Montagu quoted Asquith correctly, the prime minister's confidence must have returned rapidly after the nasty shock he sustained in the early afternoon. Such an appointment as he suggested would have been intolerable to Lloyd George on at least three counts: Asquith, not himself, would be deciding on the personnel of the new War Council; the triumvirate had assumed all along that Carson would go to the Admiralty; and in the eyes of Lloyd George and all others determined on total victory, Runciman along with McKenna symbolized all that was worst about the old coalition and War Committee. Crewe's testimony further corroborates that Asquith's interpretation of the afternoon agreement was far different from Lloyd George's. He wrote how the prime minister appeared to be "confirmed in the belief that an accommodation with Mr. Lloyd George would ultimately be achieved, *without sacrifice of his own position as chief of the War Committee.*"[65] It is worth adding that Harry Jones of the *Daily Chronicle* went to No. 10 shortly before midnight to get the latest word on the crisis. "Great activity prevailed there in spite of the late hour . . . . When at length I saw Bonham Carter he was brimming over with gladness and stated that matters had been satisfactorily arranged." Jones saw nothing at all in Bonham Carter's demeanor to suggest that Asquith had tamely surrendered to Lloyd George's dictation. He added: "I gathered that Mr. Asquith would certainly be a member of the War Council."[66]

The one jarring note came from the sensitive Montagu. As Minister of Munitions he had been close to Lloyd George these past few months, indeed he shared much of the Secretary for War's dissatisfaction with the conduct of the war under the old system, his friendship with the

63. Alan Clark (ed.), *'A Good Innings'. The Private Papers of Viscount Lee of Fareham* (London, 1974), p. 161. This is a condensed version of the original, privately printed in two large volumes in 1939.
64. Montagu interview with Robert Donald.
65. Oxford and Asquith, *Memories and Reflections*, II, 132. Italics added.
66. Harry Jones's notes of the crisis. HLRO, Beaverbrook Papers, Deed Box 4, Folder V.

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Asquith family notwithstanding. Before dinner he had promised Lloyd George to get Asquith to put down on paper the substance of the agreement reached between the two leaders. Now, sensing that Lloyd George interpreted the day's events as a great victory for himself, Montagu pressed the prime minister to put in writing just what had been agreed to, and forward a copy to Lloyd George at once. Asquith, however, pooh-poohed the idea, but whether from indolence or because his old buoyancy was reasserting itself can only be surmised. At any rate, there was no communication with Lloyd George. Instead, the following statement was issued to the press at 11:45 p.m.: "The Prime Minister, with a view to the most effective prosecution of the war, has decided to advise His Majesty the King to consent to a reconstruction of the Government." This, as Beaverbrook remarked, "was equivalent to announcing that a settlement had been reached."[67] To those in Downing Street it also meant that Asquith was still on top. His final comment on Sunday's happenings is found in a typical little note to one of his female correspondents. As evidence of his state of mind one sentence will suffice: "The 'Crisis' shows every sign of following its many predecessors to an early and unhonoured grave."[68] Like many another prime minister, Asquith believed implicitly in his ability to triumph over great crises by arranging men and adjusting offices. And like many another, he deceived himself.

The rest of the story has been told often. Monday's newspapers, led by *The Times,* proclaimed the week-end's events as the beginning of a new era with Lloyd George directing the nation's war effort. Only the *Daily Chronicle* took the opposite view that Asquith had not been relegated to merely nominal leadership. The prime minister not unnaturally was surprised and disconcerted by the tone of the press, chiefly the leading article in *The Times.* Now he wrote Lloyd George, belatedly, setting down in black and white his interpretation of Sunday's agreement. The essential point was this: "The Prime Minister to have supreme and effective control of War policy."[69] Lloyd George for his part was equally surprised by Monday's newspapers, but pleasurably so. He had not pressed his claims to their logical conclusion the previous day; now the press was doing it for him. Though he returned a mild answer to Asquith initially — "I fully accept in letter and in spirit your summary of the suggested arrangement, subject of course to personnel" — he was only waiting to make sure that the ice would bear his weight.[70] Asquith helped him by writing again on Monday night, this time stating that the

67. Beaverbrook, *Politicians and the War,* II, 231-32.
68. Asquith to Pamela McKenna, 3 Dec. 1916. Jenkins, *Asquith,* p. 443.
69. HLRO, Asquith to Lloyd George, 4 Dec. 1916, Lloyd George Papers, E/2/23/12.
70. Lloyd George to Asquith, 4 Dec. 1916, ibid., E/2/23/13.

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prime minister must also be chairman of the small war council. Admittedly he could scarcely have done otherwise in his battle to retain power. Now Lloyd George could shake his head and express astonishment and disbelief at, as he chose to see it, the way Asquith had agreed to a certain arrangement on Sunday afternoon and then gone back on his word Monday. Others took their cue from him, and the head-shaking has continued these many years.

The next three days, December 5-7, saw the crisis run its course. On Tuesday morning (5th) Lloyd George breakfasted with Bonar Law and Carson and then sent Asquith his letter of resignation. Within hours Balfour signified his intention of backing Lloyd George, while Curzon, Chamberlain, and Cecil informed Asquith that they would not remain in a ministry from which Lloyd George and Bonar Law had withdrawn. Further, they were prepared to join Lloyd George if it appeared likely that he could form a stable government. On top of this came a letter from Bonar Law announcing that all the Unionist ministers were resigning. Thus robbed of all support save those Liberal ministers who remained loyal to the end, Asquith had no choice but to resign. Now the King called upon Bonar Law to form a government, a task he abandoned when Asquith promptly refused to serve under him. Next day, Wednesday, the King made an abortive effort to heal the rifts by summoning the political leaders to a conference at Buckingham Palace; again Asquith refused to serve under another. Inevitably and inexorably the hour drew near when Lloyd George must take up the task which by the logic of events was his and his alone. Cheered on by powerful sections of the national press, Lloyd George accepted the King's commission on Wednesday evening and within twenty-four hours had succeeded in making a strong government. Unionists fell patriotically into line behind Bonar Law, Carson, and Balfour, and Labour was won over when the maestro dazzled that party's leaders with visions of great things to come. But as for Asquith and the other Liberal ministers, they were neither needed nor wanted. The virtuosity Lloyd George displayed in these three days has never been matched by a British leader.[71]

There was, of course, much more to the crisis of December 1916

71. By Thursday, December 7, Lloyd George was assured of ample support in the House of Commons. The previous evening Dr. Addison informed Lloyd George, Bonar Law, and Carson that they had the backing of 49 Liberal back-benchers for certain and the probable support of many others (of a total of 260 in the party). The Thursday morning decision by the Labour leaders meant that most of their 40 members were for Lloyd George. As for the 288-member Unionist party, it was taken for granted (correctly) from the beginning of the crisis that they would support any administration which included their own leaders and which promised to prosecute the war with more vigor than the Asquith ministry. The 80-odd Irish Nationalists were withdrawing from an active role at Westminster and therefore would not oppose Lloyd George; some even welcomed the change. Generally speaking, the parliamentary parties played a very passive role in the crisis.

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than appears in these few pages. The aim of this article is simply to show how a situation developed which neither Asquith nor Lloyd George expected or wanted, the result of misunderstanding at a crucial moment. Each man in his anxiety to avoid the final showdown in the struggle for mastery (and with the arrangement of May 1915 subconsciously there as a precedent for patching things up) failed to perceive or else closed his eyes to the other's true aims. This was bound to be fatal to one or the other, perhaps both, for it ignored completely the factor that was absent eighteen months earlier — that is, the existence of a dangerously wide gulf between two schools of thought to be found both inside and outside the British cabinet. On the one hand were those who wanted to win the war at all costs and considered no sacrifice too great; on the other were those who doubted the war could be fought to a successful conclusion and hence were inclining towards a negotiated peace. Lloyd George clearly was in the vanguard of the first group. Asquith seems to have been drifting into the arms of the second, given his propensity to compromise.

At least two things emerge from this reconstruction of certain events. Asquith has been badly misjudged on the matter of his alleged Sunday afternoon surrender to Lloyd George and Monday tergiversation. And Beaverbrook can be thanked for muddying the waters. Having said this, it may then be asked if the final outcome could have been or should have been any different. In retrospect it is easy enough to pass judgment on Lloyd George. As far as he was concerned, the war was being lost and only a change in leadership could save Britain and the Allies from disaster. He believed he held the key to victory, therefore no further justification was necessary for acting as he did. The fact that he was still on his feet at the finish of the war is widely accepted as convincing proof that he was right. Asquith on the other hand is harder to evaluate. To his detractors he has appeared as little more than a tired and ineffective old man who saw nothing but his own supposed indispensability. Yet this assumed the prolongation of hostilities for another two years. Had the struggle ended then — and it would have been far better for Western civilization if the war had ended in 1916, a view that admirers of Lloyd George and Beaverbrook never seem to entertain for a moment — perhaps men like Asquith and Grey could have made a real contribution to a saner peace settlement. As it was they never got the chance. But that is another matter.

Lord Beaverbrook wrote of the Sunday meeting between the two Liberal statesmen: "Lloyd George and Asquith practically came to terms — that is to say, the functions and organization of the War Council were to be as Lloyd George wanted, and Asquith would remain

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Premier."[72] It can now be seen that this does not stand up under a careful examination of the facts. If analysis of a single incident can throw so much into question, clearly there is need for close scrutiny of all aspects of the crisis that A. J. P. Taylor has called "a revolution, British-style."[73]

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72. *Politicians and the War*, II, 228.
73. A. J. P. Taylor, *English History, 1914-1945* (Oxford, 1965), p. 73.

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